The Longest 3 Seconds

by Cdr. Tom Taylor

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FA-18 photo by PH2(NAC) Jeffery Viano
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I was number two above a C-2 in the marshal stack, for a day, Case III recovery. From my vantage point at 7,000 feet, as far as I could see, there was a bed of cotton below me. The COD pushed two minutes ahead of me, and I dialed up his approach freq in my second radio. I wanted to hear where he broke out and get an idea of what the winds were, before I got to the ball call. No one was telling us what the weather was, which in retrospect meant, "I'm not sure I've ever seen it this bad." Adrenaline kicked in when I heard Paddles call, "Ninety-Nine, check landing lights on."

I approached four miles at 1,200 feet, dirty, with my landing lights on, still VFR above the clouds. CATCC reported, "Ship's in a port turn."

Shortly thereafter, the C-2 called "clara" at three-quarters of a mile.

The LSOs responded, "Keep it coming, you're on glideslope." Then there was an eternity of silence. I was counting potatoes, and when I got to 15, I was sure the COD pilot must have forgotten to call "ball." A couple potatoes later, I heard "wave off"—the C-2 hadn't broken out. I wondered what altitude he must have been at when he waved off. I then hunkered down and

got real serious, knowing I was going to have to fly the best instrument approach of my life.

I said a quick prayer to the ACLS gods, as I pushed over at three miles with good needles. The ship was still in a turn, searching for the wind, so I was having to work hard on lineup. My heart was racing as I leaned forward, probably looking as wide-eyed as Junior Seau just before a linebacker blitz. "Mode I's are for sissies," I thought, as I descended through 800 feet into the goo.

Constant corrections for an ever-changing lineup, along with trying to keep glideslope railed, had this old aviator tuckered out by three-quarters of a mile, and, of course, I was clara. Just then, I heard the calm, reassuring voice of CAG Paddles: "Keep it coming, you're on glide slope, on centerline." The LSOs were waving me, using the ACLS display on the LSO HUD because they couldn't see me. At 260 feet, I was still clara, but decided to continue after that pesky radar altimeter had finished distracting me. The ship was still in a turn, and I was constantly dipping my wings to stay close to centerline, working it right to get on azimuth, and then back left to get fuselage alignment, then back right for azimuth again. I was working as hard as I've ever worked at anything.

About 20 seconds after calling "clara," I got a "come left" call. The LSOs could finally see my landing lights, but I still couldn't see the ship and was rather anxious to view something out the window besides clouds. Three seconds prior to touchdown, I broke out and responded to two hard "right for lineup" calls that got me safely into the 3-wire.

"Wow, was that a rush," I thought, feeling intense relief at being aboard. I was hoping no one could hear my knees banging together. The captain asked, "Three Zero One, where did you break out?"

I replied, "Real late."

Later in the recovery, after one other trap and lots of waveoffs, we were almost bitten by one of the things that can go wrong with reverse waving, using the ACLS on the LSO HUD. One of the pilots continued below 260 feet without ACLS, using his ICLS for glideslope information. Paddles was inadvertently using ACLS information for the aircraft behind him and was giving him inappropriate glideslope and azimuth calls without having visual contact. That aircraft broke out 90 feet above the water, way below glideslope and so far right he executed an IFR waveoff up the starboard side.

Now, any good Monday-morning quarterback would ask, "So, you were blue water, right?" Well, no, we weren't. He then would slyly ask, "Was the weather at all the diverts as bad as at the ship?" Again, no. The weather at the divert was perfect, not a cloud in the sky. Well, then, the divert must have been too far away to safely get there. No, it was 45 or 50 miles away. Operational commitment during deployment, right? No, no commitment, just off the coast of CONUS during a work-up at-sea period.

Eventually CAG and the captain decided to send the rest of the airborne aircraft to the divert, waiting for better weather. We were in our last at-sea period before cruise. We knew we were good, and we knew we were ready. The night before, Paddles and the air wing had done a superb job getting aircraft aboard. The LSOs had talked aircraft down, with pilots breaking out eight to ten seconds prior to touchdown. One night later, we all thought we were unbeatable.

We go to instrument ground school every year and learn about flying approaches to airfields, but we don't talk much about doing it at the ship. For instance, if you hear a "paddles contact" call, will you continue below 260 feet without seeing the landing area? Will you continue if you hear a "keep it coming" but no "paddles contact"? That day, I went below mins with only a "keep it coming" call. The ACLS had been very reliable, so I was comfortable with the decision at the time, but in retrospect, it wasn't necessary, and it was too risky. After much reflection, I've decided to only press below 260 feet if I hear a "paddles contact" call, unless I'm about to flame out. In that case, I'll only continue with good ACLS and a "keep it coming." We came too close to tragedy on numerous occasions that day, because we were confident, overly aggressive, and had more guts than brains.

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